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ABSTRACT

Many more bilingual preschool programs are needed. Bilingual programs provide an environment where language minority students acquire English. Bilingual educators use innovative as well as time-tested methods to expose students to the English language. Instruction in and through the minority language assists students in developing the academic foundation that will serve as the basis for future academic and vocational success. Bilingual programs also seem to be conducive to positive psychosocial adjustment. Students develop constructive viewpoints about both their own ethnic group and mainstream society. A side benefit is bilingualism, an important national resource. When properly implemented, bilingual education can produce citizens with all the language, academic, and psychosocial attributes necessary to contribute to a progressive America. (MSE)

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A BRIEF CASE FOR BILINGUAL PRESCHOOLS

BY

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Introduction

The relatively small number of effective preschool programs for students from non-English language backgrounds can be interpreted as an indication that many of today's early childhood educators continue to embrace the same misconceptions about the relationship between bilingualism and scholastic performance as their predecessors. This paper, drawing on the results of research and evaluation studies, contains a brief description of how bilingual instruction supports improved academic, language, and psychosocial outcomes. An attempt has been made to not only resolve apparent contradictions in the research information but to also provide preschool educators with a general understanding of the major issues associated with formulating policies and practices regarding early childhood programs for language minority students.

Nationally, it has been estimated that at least 3.4 million schoolchildren are limited in the English language skills needed to succeed in school programs designed for native speakers of English (Waggoner, 1984). In California alone, the language minority student population is approximately 963,000 out of 4 million (California State Department of Education, 1984). More than ever, the adequacy of preschool programs to meet the educational needs of language minority students is an important public issue.

To my way of thinking, too many educators have depended solely on their common sense when making important decisions about educational programs and practices for language minority pupils. While common sense is important, it should be bolstered by information gathered through the conduct of well-controlled research and evaluation studies. Utilizing data from scientific studies to guide educational policy helps guard against simple-minded, fly-by-the-seat-of-the-pants decisions that have plagued many school reform efforts. Fortunately, there is now a growing body of empirical research in the areas of bilingualism, bilingual education, and second language acquisition from which the raw material to provide direction to educators may be extracted (California State Department of Education, 1982a).

In a survey of elementary school teachers in California (California State Department of Education, 1982b), more than 55% felt that speaking a language other than English at home was harmful to students. This is probably reflective of teacher attitudes for the last several generations. Bilingualism was and continues to be viewed as a handicap (Sanchez, 1966). It is not surprising that teachers hold such views. They have the first hand experience of watching language minority students struggle through school. It is estimated that between 23 and 28% of all U.S. Spanish-speaking students do not graduate from high school (Rumberger, 1981). Students from non-English language backgrounds are twice as likely as Anglo-Americans not to have completed high school (Aguirre & Cepeda, 1981).

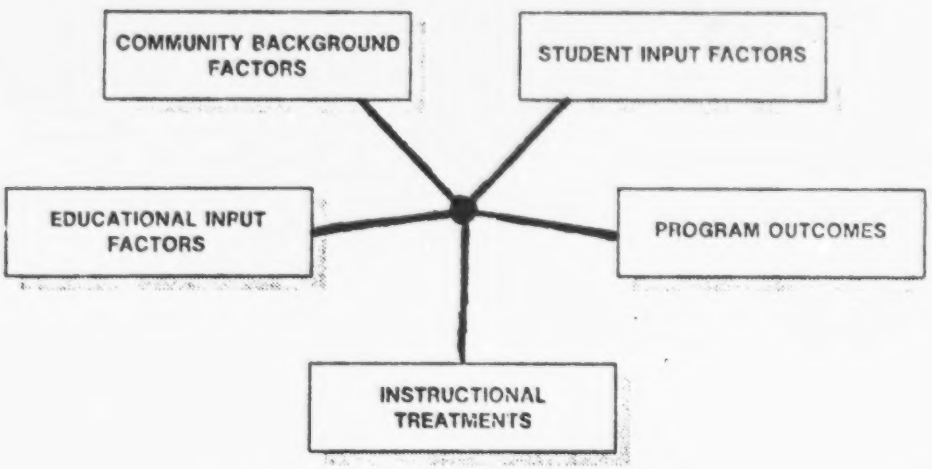
Bilingualism & School Achievement

What many educators fail to realize is that (1) a variety of factors, not only bilingualism, influence the school performance of language minority students and (2) there are various forms of bilingualism which differentially affect individual pupils.

Cummins (1979) has advanced the idea of an interaction model. He suggests that there are a number of important variables which affect schooling outcomes. Variables such as the student's first language, age at arrival in the U.S., socioeconomic status, interaction with each other and with other variables such as educational resources (both human and material). The point is that educators should be aware that multiple factors influence student outcomes and that factors interact with one another which result in interaction effects which inturn influence outcomes. Cummins model is graphically dipicted in figure 1 below.

Figure 1

THE INTERACTION MODEL FOR LANGUAGE MINORITY SCHOOLING



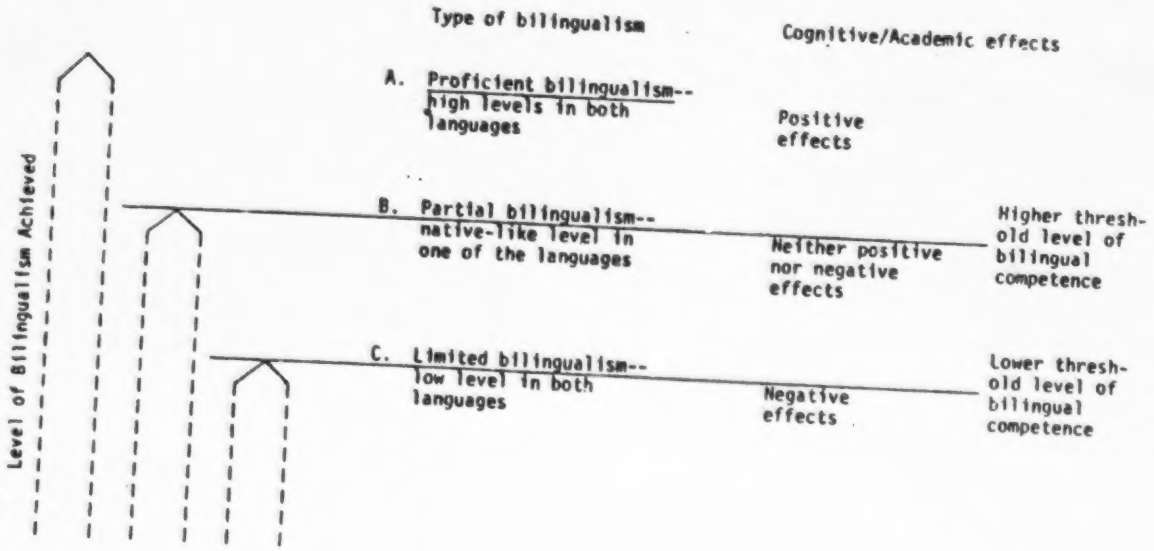
Adapted from J. Cummins, "Linguistic Interdependence and the Educational Development of Bilingual Children," Review of Educational Research, V 49, Spring, 1979

Findings that bilinguals differ in many ways but especially in the manner in which they adjust to their sociolinguistic environment have led investigators to speculate on the nature and consequences of different types of bilingualism. Lambert (1981) makes a convincing argument that bilingualism has additive and subtractive forms. In the first instance, individuals acquire a second language while developing and maintaining their mother tongue. Both languages have social value and respect for thier speakers. In contrast, as mentioned earlier, ethnolinguistic minorities in the U.S. often, because of national educational policies and social pressures of various sorts, cease to develop and eventually lose their first language in deference to the more prestigious national language. Numerous studies indicate that additive bilinguals enjoy cognitive, linguistic, and psycosocial advantages over monolinguals. Conversely, when compared to their monolingual counterparts, subtractive bilinguals are consistently found to be at a disadvantage.

Similar to the notion of additive and subtractive forms of bilingualism is the threshold hypothesis formulated by Cummins (1979). In an attempt to resolve the apparent inconsistencies in the results of studies on bilingualism, Cummins promotes the threshold hypothesis as a framework with which to predict the schooling effects of different forms of bilingualism. Cummins (1981a) suggests that proficient bilinguals will usually experince positive outcomes as a result of developing high levels of skills in two languages. On the other hand, limited bilinguals have less than native-like ability in either of their two languages. These individuals commonly experience negative school outcomes. A third group, labeled as partial bilinguals, develop native-like ability in one language but not the other. If the language of native-like ability is the mother tongue and also the national language Cummins (1979) reports no negative outcomes. This has been the case, for instance, of English-speaking high school students in the U.S. studying German, French, or Spanish. If however, the language of native-like ability has replaced the mother tongue, individuals may suffer some psychological disadvantages which in turn influence cognition (Lambert, 1982). Thus, in the case of language minority students, partial bilingualism is usually the result of a subtractive process. On the other hand, majority students invariably experience partial bilingualism as an additive process. The threshold hypothesis suggested by Cummins is visually displayed in figure 2.

Figure 2

Cognitive/Academic Effects of Different Types of Bilingualism


Type of bilingualism
Cognitive/Academic effects
Level of Bilingualism Achieved
A. Proficient bilingualism--high levels in both languages
Positive effects
B. Partial bilingualism--native-like level in one of the languages
Neither positive nor negative effects
Higher threshold level of bilingual competence
C. Limited bilingualism--low level in both languages
Negative effects
Lower threshold level of bilingual competence

Adapted from P. Toukomaa and T. Skutnabb-Kangas, The Intensive Teaching of the Mother Tongue to Migrant Children of Pre-School Age and Children in the Lower Level of Comprehensive School. Helsinki, Finland: Finnish National Commission for UNESCO, 1977.

Arguments Against Bilingualism

Collectively, Lambert through the constructs of additive and subtractive bilingualism and Cummins through the notion of a threshold hypothesis, advance a framework by which the academic, linguistic, and psychosocial attainments of varying types of bilinguals may be understood. Still, a number of arguments against bilingualism and bilingual education continue to be advanced.

A common argument against bilingual schooling is that language minority students should be exposed to as much English as possible. The obvious theory is that a child will learn English if he or she is required to speak English and nothing but English (National Education Association, 1972). The maximum exposure to English theory just does not account for much of the data on schooling language minority students. It neglects the fact that large numbers of such students have failed in the English-only regular school program. In addition, many immigrant students enter U.S. schools in the late elementary or even secondary grades and do quite well linguistically and academically. If maximum exposure to English were essential, these students would be hopelessly behind native speakers of English. Finally, evaluations of some successful bilingual and foreign language immersion programs have shown that students may be schooled up to 50% of the time or more in a language other than English and still attain native-like ability in English. The issue seems to be more one of sufficient exposure to the second language and not one of maximum exposure. Once students receive sufficient instruction in a language, additional exposure will have little effect. In the case of bilingual schooling, superfulous instructional time in English would be better devoted to sustaining academic achievement in the language other than English.

Another argument against bilingual schooling is that instruction in two languages reduces the amount of academic material that can be covered since more instructional time is needed. The fact is, that if implemented properly, academic progress in such subjects as math, science, and social studies will occur at a normal rate in bilingual classes. A convincing explanation of how this happens has been suggested through the notion of a Common Underlying Proficiency (Cummins, 1979; 1981). This model of bilingual proficiency posits the idea that many literacy-related aspects of language proficiency are common across different languages. That is, cognitive/academic skills, competencies, and knowledge learned in one language can be expressed, manifested, and brought to bear on similar tasks in another once basic communicative skills are acquired in both languages. The notion of a Common Underlying Proficiency explains how some Vietnamese refugee students graduate from high school as valedictorians after only two or three years of schooling in the U.S.. Apparently these students are able to manifest the knowledge learned through their first language in English as soon as they have acquired conversational skills in English.

On a more practical note, many teachers and administrators object to bilingual education on the grounds that the human and material resouces are not currently available to implement such programs. In California alone, more than half of the elementary school level bilingual classes are staffed by regular instead of bilingual teachers.

Faced with a shortage of qualified staff or adequate materials, educaters often abandon the assumption that the students' mother tongue can be utilized in an educationally supportive manner. While full bilingual programs appear to have better results than other bilingual models, it is not necessarily an either or question. Even when it is impossible to implement a full bilingual program, several approaches which use the primary language are still available.

For instance, in the French immersion programs in Canada, a team teaching approach is used in which some teachers are strictly English models and others French models. This strategy has also been used in a smaller number of U.S. bilingual schools. The advantage is that minority language teachers can cover almost twice as many students. Incidently, under this format, quality of instruction is often improved since non-native speakers of the minority are not required to teach in that language during their training period.

When bilingual teachers are not even available for teaming, magnet classrooms and learning center approaches have been used. Many schools have employed bilingual teacher aides who assist regular teachers. School officials often neglect community language schools and parents, who through structured programs, can contribute significantly to the children's academic growth. What should be avoided are policies and practices which assume that, because of a shortage of bilingual teachers or even aides, the students' mother tongue is no longer a vehicle for academic achievement and positive socialization.

Effective Program Features

In the last several years, a number of comprehensive reviews have been done on research and evaluation studies concerning bilingual schooling (Baker & de Kanter, 1983; Cummins, 1979; Diaz, 1983; Swain & Lapkin 1981). An analysis of these investigations points to certain sociolinguistic and instructional factors, both formal and informal, which tend to be strongly associated with positive program outcomes. The strength of these indicators is based upon the frequency and consistency with which they are manifested in programs which have been successful in promoting high levels of language development, academic achievement, and prosocial behavior.

Duration of Treatment. Many students are able to acquire basic conversation skills in a second language in a period of two to three years. Yet, most students take from five to seven years to acquire cognitive/academic language skills which are normal for

their age and/or grade level. Successful programs are most often designed to accommodate students during the entire time required to reach the higher level academic language skills.

Exposure to L2. Students are exposed to ample amounts of comprehensible second language input in acquisition-rich environments (Krashen, 1981). This is accomplished by providing participants with not only language classes but subject matter classes such as science and social studies in which the second language is used as a medium of instruction in a sheltered format. The idea is to use methods and techniques which approximate the experiences students have in acquiring their first language.

Use of L1. The students' native language is taught as a subject and is used for subject matter instruction. This is done to promote L1 development, foster academic achievement, and also to provide students with background knowledge to make second language input more comprehensible (Krashen, 1981). Language minority students often enter U.S. schools at an academic level lower than their English-speaking peers. In the process of learning English, they fall even further behind. By the time such students acquire even basic conversational skills (2-3 years) they are at a point where they will probably never catch up to native speakers of English. Use of the students' native language to sustain academic achievement is an important feature of successful programs.

Nature of Instruction. In bilingual situations, monolingual lesson delivery (i.e, different periods of time devoted to instruction in and through each of the two languages of the program) seems to be superior to designs which rely on language mixing during a single lesson or time frame. This is not to say that language mixing itself is harmful; rather it appears that sustained periods of monolingual instruction in each language are required to promote adequate academic as well as language development.

In addition, in successful programs students commonly receive their instruction from certificated teachers. Over the course of the program students are exposed to a number of teachers who have native or native-like ability in the second language and a number who have native or native-like ability in the mother tongue. Such teachers are able to initiate and sustain quality student/teacher communications such as the negotiation of meaning.

In summary, the significant features associated with positive program outcomes identified in this paper are in alignment with the theoretical constructs suggested by Lambert (1981) and Cummins (1981). The features which support sufficient exposure to both the first and second language, a focus on academic achievement, and quality student/teacher interactions are the same features which contribute to the development of individuals who are proficient, additive bilinguals. Should any of these elements be neglected, the effectiveness of the instructional treatment will probably diminish.

Exemplary Preschool Program

Since 1979, the Carpinteria Unified School District in Santa Barbara County, California has implemented a Spanish-only preschool program for the children of low socioeconomic status farm workers. Stimulus for an academic program in Spanish came after it was noticed that the Spanish-background children consistently scored much lower than English-speaking children on kindergarten readiness tests even though the former group was tested in Spanish.

The main goal of the Carpinteria program was to foster academic growth among the Spanish-speaking youngsters in an effort to close the achievement gap between minority and majority students. The project also included activities in which the parents were required to assist their children.

Over a four-year period, the Spanish-only preschool program has produced very positive results. Participants have averaged a score of 21.6 on the kindergarten readiness test in comparison to English-speaking peers who scored at 23.2. Spanish-speaking pupils in a preschool program with a strong emphasis on the development of English skills averaged 14.6. Of special note is the fact that the Spanish-only preschoolers also outperformed the Spanish-speaking students in the regular program on measures of oral English proficiency. It seems that the highly-charged academic and language environment in the experimental preschool assisted the children in acquiring more of the English to which they were exposed to in the school, neigborhood, and at home (Tempes, 1984).

Conclusion

It seems to me that we need many more programs like the Carpinteria preschool model. First of all, bilingual programs do provide an environment where language minority students acquire English. Bilingual educators use innovative as well as time-tested methods in exposing students to the English language. Secondly, instruction in and through the minority language assists students in developing the academic foundation which will serve as the basis for future success in higher education and vocational pursuits. Thirdly, bilingual programs seem to be conducive to positive psychosocial adjustment. Students develop constructive viewpoints not only about their own ethnic group but also about mainstream society. Finally, a side benefit of bilingual instruction is bilingualism, the knowledge of English and one other language. This does not lead to pockets of monolinguals who refuse to use English but rather to well-adjusted individuals who can use English as well as another tongue, an important national resource. Interestingly enough, bilingualism in itself seems to have a positive effect on scholastic achievement. Language minority and English-speaking students who learn a second language well seem to do better academically, are better at creative thinking tasks, and often. even gain in IQ points.

Thus, when properly implemented, bilingual education can result in productive citizens with all of the language, academic, and psychosocial attributes necessary to contribute to a progressive America. English will be their common language but thankfully not their only language. The students will believe in and support the notions of unity, democracy, and prosperity, for after all, they will owe their well-being to these ideals. In addition they will value the notion of cooperativeness, the cooperativeness that was demonstrated by mainstream America to assist them in achieving their educational goals. Bilingual education is a step in the right direction. We should work to improve it but, unfortunately, often we don't.

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